

## CHAPTER V.

### SITTING BULL'S LAST FIGHT.

General Miles began his march from Fort Peck, along the right bank of the Milk river, on the morning of the 15th. We halted that day on Box Elder creek, where we went into camp. The rain came on at night, as usual, rendering the old Red River wagon road a perfect slough. Next morning we were off again, Lieut. Philo Clark and his Indians in advance, because some Cheyennes had seen pony tracks, which indicated the neighborhood of a hostile hunting party. General Miles placed a signal station on Tiger Butte, some dozen miles from Fort Peck, and kept up communication by means of the heliostat, the same kind of apparatus used by the English in Afghanistan and Zululand. It is an idea borrowed from the Indians of both hemispheres, and is simply a method of telegraphing information by reflections of the sun in small mirrors. The flashes, bright as lightning, can be seen at an immense distance on a clear day, but when the sky is cloudy the heliostat is powerless to operate. Some genius might fill the gap by means of electric-light signals. The system is very efficient, if careful men are employed, but a steady hand and quick eye are needed to send or receive messages correctly.

Milk river is a considerable stream, with deep water and a quicksand bottom through most of its course. The banks

are high and abrupt, and the watering of stock is attended with danger in all places, and, at most points, is impracticable. The fords are few and treacherous, and, like those of the Rio Grande, shift their channels every few hours. I suppose it is hardly necessary to say that Milk river takes its name from the color of its water, which bears some slight resemblance to lacteal fluid. As it is very alkaline, the similarity ends with the color.

We observed some herds of buffalo on our left during the forenoon, and some of our Indians amused themselves by chasing them in the whirlwind style peculiar to the native American. The day, toward noon, became distressingly sultry, so much so that nearly all the horses in the column were covered with foam and sweat. As we neared the old crossing of Milk river, near Campbell's houses, the site of an old trading station, the Cheyennes saw a couple of horsemen on the other side and immediately pursued them. In this work they were joined by the Crow allies. The aborigines stripped off their clothing, and swam their ponies over the fordless river, themselves hanging on to the head gear of their animals. They were soon "whooping up" the fugitives on the left bank, going forward in groups, as is the invariable custom of scouting Indians. We encamped on the river, just in time to baffle a fierce storm, to await developments. To go into any description of a camping scene—something painted and pictured oftener, perhaps, than any other on earth—would be stupidly tedious. Enough to say that, on an Indian scout, General Miles, like all experienced soldiers, always picketed his

horses in the center of his battalions, so that there must have been a fight before the Indians could stampede any portion of the herd.

The country through which we moved from the Missouri was rich and pastoral in appearance. It is not unlike some of the better portions of Minnesota, and was then one of the best buffalo ranges in North America. This, no doubt, accounts for Sitting Bull's interest in keeping so fine a country for himself and his people. It is true that the wily savage was, to all intents and purposes, a British subject, but his influence crossed the line, and no settlers would venture on Milk river until the implacable savage was thoroughly whipped and humbled. I don't care what any one says about Sitting Bull not having been a warrior. If he had not the sword, he had, at least, the magic sway of a Mohammed over the rude war-tribes that engirdled him. Everybody talks of Sitting Bull, and, whether he be a figure-head or an idea, or an incomprehensible mystery, his old-time influence was undoubted. His very name was potent. He was the Rhoderick Dhu of his wild and warlike race, and, when he fell the Sioux confederation fell with him, even as drooped the pine of Clan Alpine when its hero sank before the sword of the Knight of Snowdown.

A delegation of the Yanktonnais, headed by Black Catfish, came into camp on the 16th, and had a talk with General Miles. They made the customary complaints about insufficient supplies at the agency, and requested a change of agents, professing to have no confidence in the incumbent. They also complained that no ammunition was furnished them and that they had to hunt with bows and arrows.

The General said he would report what they said to the Great Father. Personally he had nothing to do with the agent. As regarded the ammunition, none would be allowed them while any hostiles remained south of the line and while their young men showed a hostile spirit. If they proved loyal and peaceful, all the wrongs they complained of would be righted. They all uttered "Ugh!" drew their blankets around their manly forms, and, mounting their ponies, rode back to Fort Peck, vowing friendship. This was nearly always the result of an Indian council, but, in the long run, very little came of their good resolutions, for the Indian department pigeon-holed reports adverse to its pet appointees, except in extraordinary cases, and, "Lo," very justly, thought that no white man's promise could be relied upon. If the just complaints of the agency savages had been attended to in Washington, Sitting Bull's recruits would have been much less numerous than they were. But, then, is not the capital the seat of all wisdom, and why should any person on the far frontier, who saw how the thing worked, find fault?

About sundown our Indians came into camp, howling like fiends. They swam back across the river with a half-breed prisoner tied to his horse. The poor devil looked half scared to death, which was hardly to be wondered at. The Cheyennes caught him after a chase of twenty miles, and subsequently captured his camp, people and seven wagons. Only for the strict orders given by General Miles and Lieutenant Clark, the whole party would undoubtedly have been killed and scalped. They brought the prisoner in as a hostage.

There was an engagement between Lieut. Philo Clark, with two companies of soldiers, and the Indian scouts, and a hunting party of hostiles, some distance up Beaver creek on the 17th. The Sioux made a running fight, falling back on their main body. Clark pursued, but immediately notified General Miles, who moved with all his available men to the assistance of the lieutenant. It was a regular forced march for twenty miles or so—the cavalry and mounted infantry trotting or galloping most of the way. The Crows and most of the Cheyennes stood faithfully by Clark, but the Assiniboines and the Bannocks came streaming back disconcerted. They had hardly bargained for hostiles so soon. The head of the supporting column came up just as Clark drove the Sioux over Milk river. Major Rice, by making great efforts, brought up two Hotchkiss guns and shelled the stubborn hostiles with such good effect, that they broke and ran like hares. They hate the sound of cannon and dread its long range power. One Sioux, when Miles and his staff ascended the bluff overlooking the creek, deliberately led his pony several hundred yards down the opposite eminence and fired at the group, without any effect. Then he mounted and rode off to join his retreating companions.

The manner in which the troops were brought into action—if the Sioux had wished for a general fight—was admirable. The artillery, in advance, fired over Lieutenant Clark's command in the creek ravine. The cavalry formed the front skirmish line and the mounted infantry the second. General Miles and all the officers of his staff were with the forward skirmish-line. The hostiles did not covet any further en-

counter after the cannon came in play, and, having thrown away tons of buffalo meat, pack saddles, lariats, and other articles of Indian wealth, made fine time toward the north. Our Cheyenne and Crow allies picked up several abandoned ponies and followed up the Sioux retreat until night came.

Five scalps, taken on the field, were the trophies of our side, but, without doubt, the enemy carried off some of their dead and badly wounded. Lieutenant Clark's loss amounted to two Indians killed, and two Indians and two soldiers of the 2d Cavalry wounded.

The sun was near the western horizon when the affair ended. Our train was several miles behind, because the roads were too miry to permit of fast driving. The clouds and the atmosphere denoted the approach of a furious storm and we were ordered to counter-march so as to go into camp with our train. I think every one who participated in that night march will agree with me in pronouncing it one of the most disagreeable ever experienced. The rain came down in blinding, bewildering splashes. The wind blew a hurricane. The thunder absolutely shook the ground. The night was pitch-dark, except when the fierce and fitful flashes of forked lightning revealed the fast-moving ranks for a second, and then left them wrapped in impenetrable blackness, except for a peculiar phosphorescent glow on the horses' ears. We had to keep close up on the heels of each other's animals, in order to make it possible for us to move at all. Under the dense pall of night we forded Beaver creek, which, in its swollen condition, was no easy matter. The stream was full of boulders, and the horses slipped and

stumbled every instant. It was nearly eleven o'clock when the shrill braying of the mules announced the presence of the train. We had no chance of seeing where to go, and several officers and men lost their respective companies for a time. In the midst of the storm we tumbled in where we could, glad of an opportunity to get dismounted. It is not wonderful that Indian campaigners become prematurely old. All of us were heated by the long gallop of the afternoon. A few hours later we were drenched to the skin, and in that condition most of us slept until morning. The lightning at times seemed to be showered down as in sparks. Taken altogether, the situation was, if uncomfortable beyond measure, interesting in the extreme. But such is military life on the frontier—a compound of mud and romance.

Mr. Booth, a New York capitalist, went out there for a summer's amusement. He got the full benefit of the entertainment, but bore it pluckily. When we were nearing the Sioux in the afternoon, the New Yorker discovered that he was unarmed. He borrowed a pistol from a soldier, and, with the weapon naked in his hand, rode forward to glory. "Our mess" insisted that it was Booth's naked pistol, as much as Clark's rifles and Rice's cannon, that made the Sioux warriors take to their heels.

When the violence of the storm had in a measure abated, Major Gordon, of the 2d Cavalry, called my attention to a conical tent, which was pitched at some distance from us, and which was revealed by a candle light within it. After unsaddling our horses, we made for that tent, because we knew it to be headquarters. When we got there, we found General

Miles and some of his staff listening to a gigantic, almost naked, Crow Indian, who was boasting of his deeds during Clark's affair with the Sioux, and who, occasionally, flourished a scalp that he had taken during the engagement. The General, having listened to the boastful savage, good-humoredly gave him a present and sent him on his way rejoicing.

Major Gordon, with the combined thrift and hospitality of his Scottish blood, produced a flask of excellent usquebaugh, which warmed the hearts of those who were as wet and miserable as it was possible for men to be. General Miles managed to procure us a slight lunch before we lay down to rest on some tent flies and blankets that were almost as moist as ourselves.